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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 000524

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SUBJECT: HEAD OF LAND-RIGHTS ORGANIZATION IMPRISONED, BEATEN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Shahidul Islam, director of the non-governmental organization Uttaran, was detained at his organization's training center in Tala in southwestern Bangladesh by army personnel on January 27. At a meeting with POLOFF on March 22, Uttaran officials provided first-hand details of Islam's arrest and beating at an army camp, and gave an update on his condition and case. Islam has had three charges have been filed against him and he is currently in prison, awaiting a court hearing on a bail petition. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) POLOFF met with Uttaran Acting Director Dr. Avizit Reaz Quazi and Uttaran Dhaka coordinator Fatima Halima Ahmed on March 22. Uttaran is a non-governmental organization advocating land-rights issues, and is based in Tala near Satkhira in southwestern Bangladesh. It receives funding from international donors, including the European Commission, but not the U.S. government. Uttaran Director Shahidul Islam was detained by army soldiers at his organization's training center in Tala on January 27. Embassy reported on this through other channels when the incident occurred. Quazi and Ahmed met with POLOFF to provide an update on the situation and to give first-hand details of the arrest.

¶3. (C) Ahmed, who said he was present when Islam was detained, told POLOFF 20 soldiers, some armed with hockey sticks, arrived at the center and took Islam to the nearby army camp. Islam told Uttaran colleagues that Major Mehedi Hasan, head of the Tala army camp, asked him about Uttaran's activities and where a local council official linked to Uttaran was hiding a secret weapons cache. Islam answered that he didn't know about any weapons. He was then blindfolded and beaten below the waist. Afterwards he was handed over to the Tala police station. Dr. Quazi went to the police station and tried to speak to Islam, but he was semi-conscious. Islam was not taken to the local hospital until January 29. He spent six days in the hospital, where he was treated for fractures to his leg and hand and subcutaneous hemorrhaging.

¶4. (C) Islam is in jail awaiting a High Court decision on his bail petition. The local magistrate has filed charges against him for murder, land theft, and extortion. Ahmed and Dr. Avizat claimed the charges were fabricated. They said the real reason for Islam's detention was because Uttaran's partnership with certain local officials to assign plots of land to landless residents had run afoul of vested political interests. They said Major Hasan was working on behalf of these interests, and said if he were transferred the harrassment against Islam and Uttaran would cease.

¶5. (C) Ahmed said local jail officials have refused so far to

remand Islam into joint forces' custody (which includes the army) for further questioning, justifying this on health grounds. Islam's case will be heard before the local court in the coming weeks, and according to Ahmed the jail officials feel they can no longer postpone handing him over. The Uttaran officials are concerned once Islam is remanded to the joint forces, Major Hasan will have him tortured to punish him for the attention he has drawn to the case.

¶6. (C) The European Commission Head of Mission has closely followed this case, and has protested Islam's treatment to the government. Ambassador raised the issue with the interim government's Foreign Affairs Advisor, and Embassy continues to monitor the case closely.

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